

The (non)use of a third-person pronoun *kanojo* ‘she’ in L1 and L2 Japanese narratives

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1.0 Introduction

It has been reported that L1 Japanese speakers tend to use nominal forms or zero pronouns instead of third person pronouns such as *kare* ‘he’ and *kanojo* ‘she’ in oral narratives (Clancy, 1980) and written narratives (Inoi, 2008). This is different from L1 English speakers who use third person pronouns such as *he* and *she* extensively. In L2 contexts, L1 Japanese speaking learners of English tend to use more nominal forms than pronouns in their L2 English narratives, perhaps as an instance of L1 transfer of their tendency to use nominal forms in their L1 narratives (Inoi, 2008; Sawasaki, Terao & Shirahata, 2014). L2 Japanese learners’ use of third person pronouns, however, has not been extensively investigated yet.

This paper reports the results of a preliminary experiment of the (non)use of a third person pronoun *kanojo* ‘she’ in L1 and L2 Japanese narratives of *The Little Match Girl* by Hans Christian Anderson to find out whether learners of Japanese, mostly L1 English speakers and some L1 Chinese speakers, would use *kanojo* as they use *she* in English or *ta* ‘he/she’ in Chinese (i.e., L1 transfer). It is anticipated that L2 Japanese speakers will use third-person pronouns, possibly due to L1 transfer, whereas L1 Japanese speakers will not.

This paper is organized as follows: a review of previous studies in Section 2, a description of methodology in Section 3, results in Section 4, and a brief discussions and concluding remarks in Section 5.

2.0 Previous Research

Historically speaking, third person pronouns were close to nonexistent until the Edo period (1603-1868) in Japanese language. In fact, *kare* ‘he’ and *kanojo* ‘she’¹ did not exist until it was needed for translating foreign language publications in Meiji era (1868-1912) (Okumura, 1965). Although the use of these words in reference to peers or subordinates has been increasing recently, especially among younger generations, they continue to be avoided when reference requires respect (Jorden and Noda, 1987), and it is still widely believed that they are not commonly used in daily conversations (Sawasaki, Terao, Shirahara, 2014).

As mentioned, previous research reports that L1 Japanese speakers do not use third person pronouns when keeping track of referents in oral narratives in Japanese. For example, Clancy (1980) reported that none of the L1 Japanese speakers (N=20) used third person pronouns in their simultaneous narrative task using a silent film involving multiple characters. In contrast, L1 English speakers used third person pronouns extensively in English as shown in (1). Clancy reported that in place of third person pronouns, L1 Japanese speakers used more nominal forms and/or zero pronouns as a referent in their narratives as shown in (2) and (3).

¹ *Kanojo* is sometimes used as ‘you’—a term of address in reference to young women, and as a term of reference for a girlfriend (Jorden and Noda, 1987). Interestingly, *Genki*, a popular Japanese language textbook widely used in the U.S., only provides the definition of *kare* as “boyfriend” and *kanojo* as “girl friend” and does not even provide the pronominal use of *kare* and *kanojo* (Sakano, Ohno, Sakane, and Shinagawa, 1999).

- (1) “... a kid comes by on a bicycle, he stops, he gets off his bike.”
- (2) “... *otoko no ko-ga, totte, sono ko wa, jitensha ni notte imasita ne.*”
 A boy-NOM passed that kid-TOP bicycle riding was
 ‘A boy passed, and the boy, was riding on a bicycle, you know?’
- (3) “... *sono kago no, nashi-o ko jitto miru wake ne?*”
 That basket pears-ACC like this fixedly see
 ‘(he) stares at the pears, in that basket, you know?’

In more recent study, Inoi (2008), in his written narrative task using a series of pictures depicting a family vacation involving three characters, also reported that none of the L1 Japanese speakers (N=30) used third person pronouns in Japanese. Similar to (2) and (3), L1 Japanese speakers used nominal phrase and zero pronouns quite often to refer to the characters in the story.

On the other hand, from L2 Japanese learners’ view, in comparison to first- and second-person referents, the acquisition of third person referents using zero pronouns has been reported as quite difficult, at least for L1 English speakers, due to its complexity of dealing with multiple characters (Yanagimachi, 2000). During Yanagimachi’s narrative task of retelling a story from a short video clip involving multiple characters, L2 Japanese learners, especially the lower- and intermediate-level ones, rapidly switched their subjects using overt referent forms as they struggled to decide on which character to fixate their narratives from, as shown in (4). In contrast, L1 Japanese speakers were able to keep the same subject by using zero pronouns, as they managed to fixate their narratives on one character with the use of auxiliary verbs such as giving and receiving verbs as in (5).

- (4) “...anoo, obaasan-ga, anoo, inu, anoo, akachan-ga, daisuki, kedo, soshite,
 uhn grandma-Nom uhn dog uhn baby love but then
 anoo, anoo, inu-ga, anoo, uchi, uchi, e, ano, anoo, anoo, inu-ga, sayonara
 uhn uhn dog-Nom uhn home home uhn uhm uhm dog-Nom goodbye
 deshita (laugh), kedo, kedo, soshite, anoo, anoo, o, obaasan-ga, anoo, anoo,
 but but then uhn uhn grandma-Nom uhm uhm
inu-ga [o]. anoo, mm, anoo, mimasen, mimasen deshita, soshite, anoo, inu-ga,
 dog-Nom uhm uhm not see did not see then uhn dog-Nom
 anoo, kaerimasu.”
 uhn return
 ‘... uhn, the grandma, uhm, loves, the dog, uhm, the baby, but, and, uhm, the dog, uhm,
 uh. The dog said good-bye (laugh), but, but, and, uhm, the grandma, uhm, not see, did not
 see the dog, and, uhm, the dog, uhm, goes back to [leaves] the house.’
- (5) “samishii omoi o shite, sooji toka, ato shokki arai toka hajimeru n desu
 lonely feeling do cleaning and then dish washing and start
 kedo, amarinimo kamatte kurenai mon dakara, katteni
 but not at all pay attention not give because on his will
 iede o, shite shimatte...”
 home run away from do
 ‘(the dog) felt lonely, and (the dog) started vacuuming and washing the dishes and so on,
 but, (the couple) did not pay attention to (the dog) left the house of his own will, and...’

Interestingly, however, the tendency for L1 Japanese speakers to not use third person pronouns in English seems to be mitigated when the narrative task focuses on a single character for an extended period of time, according to Sawasaki, Terao, and Shirahata (2014). In their study, L1 Japanese speakers (N=20²) were instructed to write an English narrative for *Warashibechoja* “The Straw Millionaire” and *The Three Little Pigs* using picture books without any words. Although Sawasaki, Terao, and Shirahata’s (2014) report does not provide any examples of narrative scripts, Table 1 provides the frequency of proper nouns and third person pronouns used for each character in the stories. Specifically, it shows that the third person pronoun *he* is used more frequently for characters that appear in the story for an extended period of time without being interrupted by other animate characters, namely, Taro from *Warashibechoja*, Saburo (the youngest pig) and Tom (the wolf) from *The Three Little Pigs*.

Table 1: Frequency of Reference Forms used in *Warashibechoja* and *The Three Little Pigs*

		Proper Nouns		3 rd person Pronouns			Total	
		Taro	Taro’s	He	Him	His	Proper Nouns	3 rd person pronouns
<i>Warashibechoja</i>	Taro	89	2	118	14	11	91	143
<i>The Three Little Pigs</i>	Ichiro (oldest)	26	11	8	5	16	37	29
	Jiro (middle)	20	17	1	3	12	37	22
	Saburo (youngest)	32	29	23	4	13	61	38
	Tom (the wolf)	63	1	35	0	15	64	38

Finally, it is worth mentioning that a narrative task that only requires participants to keep track of a single third-person character may ease the complexity of dealing with multiple characters, and L2 Japanese speakers may be able to appropriately use zero pronouns for the character in such a context. Further, it may also prompt both L1 and L2 Japanese learners to use third person pronouns, possibly in an attempt to avoid relying on only nominal and zero pronouns to keep track of the same character for an extended period of time. However, Sawasaki, Terao, and Shirahata (2014) did not have their L1 Japanese participants to narrate their stories in Japanese nor had any L2 Japanese participants in their study, and whether L1 or L2 Japanese speakers would use third person pronouns in Japanese in the same task is unknown.

3.0 Methodology

A total of 35 college students in a Midwest University participated in the study. In particular, there were five L1 English speakers, 23 L2 Japanese speakers³, and seven L1 Japanese speakers⁴.

² Except for one participant who had the experience of living in an English speaking country for 10 months, none of the participants had ever lived in an English speaking country.

³ Including 18 L1 English speakers, four Mandarin Chinese speakers, and one Malaysian speaker. There were 9 participants from intermediate-low level class (300 classroom instructional hours), 6 from intermediate-high level class (440 classroom instructional hours), and 8 from advanced-level class (520 or more classroom instructional hours).

As mentioned, participants were instructed to tell the story of *The Little Match Girl* by Hans Christian Andersen for an imaginary five-year-old boy (depicted by an illustration on the side of the book), using a picture storybook without words (Erickson, 1987). *The Little Match Girl* was chosen for data collection because the story focuses on a single character—the little match girl, whose name is unknown—for an extended period of time without being interrupted by other animate characters; which could increase a chance for narrators to use third-person pronouns for the character as suggested by Sawasaki, Terao, and Shirahata's (2014) study. Participants' narratives were audio-recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

4.0 Results

As anticipated, all L1 English speakers used the third person singular female pronoun *she* extensively in their narration as in (6).

- (6) “There once was a little girl, who was really poor, and she didn't have a home. But she would walk around the streets trying to sell matches.”

L2 Japanese speakers, on the other hand, used nominal forms or zero pronouns to track the little match girl as in (7), and 19 participants did not use *kanojo* at all⁵.

- (7) “...*soko ko-wa, tsukarete, michi no kado de suwatte itan da. Poketto no matchi o totte, tsuke, tsukemashita.*”
 that kid-TOP tired road corner was sitting pocket match
 took out lighted
 ‘That kid was tired, and (she) was sitting in a corner of the road. (She) took out the match from the pocket and (she) lighted it.

As in (8), there were three L1 English learners of Japanese who used *kanojo* once or twice in the subject position, and interestingly, there was one L1 Chinese learner of Japanese who used *kanojo* extensively (a total of seven times).

- (8) “...*kono wakai onna no ko-wa, yuki ga futteiru aida ni aruiteimasu... kanojyo-wa,*
 This young girl-TOP snow falling while walking she-TOP
totemo sabisikute...”
 very lonely and
 ‘This young girl was walking in the snow... She was very lonely, and...

As for L1 Japanese speakers, interestingly five out of seven participants used *kanjo* in the subject position. While three of them only used *kanojo* in the subject position only once, two participants whose experience in the U.S. is limited to less than two months used it quite

⁴ Five participants had lived in the U.S. for less than two months, and the remaining two who had lived in the U.S. for more than five years.

⁵ One interesting strategy to keep track of the little match girl was observed with two of the L1 English participants who came up with the proper noun “*Matchi Gaaru*” ‘(a) Match girl’ as the name of the little match girl as in (9).

extensively for five times. Table 2 provides the summary of the use of *kanojo* in the subject position.

Table 2. Summary of the use of *kanojo* in the subject position

	L1 Eng	L2 Japanese			L1 Jap
		Inter Low	Inter High	Advanced	
Total # of participants	5	9	6	8	7
# of participants who used <i>kanojo</i> in subject position	5	2	1	1	5
Total incidence of <i>kanojo</i> in subject position	51	4	7	1	13

5.0 Discussions and concluding remarks

Although some L2 participants used *kanojo* in the subject position, interestingly *kanojo* was not used by most of the L2 Japanese participants in the study. This is perhaps due to the infrequent input from the language instruction in the language program. One L1 Mandarin participant used *kanojo* in the subject position quite extensively, but it may just be due to individual preference since other three L1 Mandarin participants did not use it⁶. On the other hand, *kanojo* in the subject position was used relatively more by L1 Japanese participants which is contrary to the general assumption. In fact, five out of seven participants used *kanojo* in the subject position, and two of them used it quite extensively. Perhaps, it could be the result from the nature of a story with a focus on a single character, or L2 English cross-linguistic influence they have had from studying English intensively, or the increased use of the third person pronouns in present Japanese language, or just an individual variation. However, the number of participants in this study is limited and more data from participants from different settings is needed to figure out the (non)use of third-person pronouns in the present day Japanese language.

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⁶ However, it is interesting to note that three L1 Chinese Mandarin speakers used *kanojo* elsewhere in their narrative.